BOOK / 1983



A BESTIARY OF SMALL CULTS

Alasdair Penhallow

APOCALYPSE CULT

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PREFACE

I should say at once that I have not been converted, and that this is not for want of invitation.

I have sat in forty-one rooms. Most of them were rented. Several were above shops, and one was a garage from which the car had been moved for the evening. In each I was told, with courtesy and usually with tea, that the world as I understood it was shortly to end, or had been secretly replaced, or was governed from a place I had not heard of. I wrote it down. I was thanked for coming.

The reader who expects to be frightened will be disappointed. There is a literature of fright on this subject and I have no wish to add to it. The groups I describe never harmed anyone that I could discover, their own members included. They did not take their people's money, beyond a collection for the hire of the hall. They did not forbid them to see their families, and several of the families came along. When a member left, it was generally remarked that he would be missed, and that the door was open.

I have been asked what, in that case, is the interest. It is this. We are accustomed to meet religion in its established forms, where it is so encrusted with history and property that the belief itself is hard to see. In a room above a shop, with eleven people and a hired urn, there is nothing else to look at. Here is a human being who has decided that a

certain thing is true, against every authority, and has arranged his week around it. I find that worth an evening.

I have called the book a bestiary. I mean no disrespect. The old bestiaries described their creatures carefully, believed rather more than they should, and drew a moral from each. I have tried to do the first, avoid the second, and leave the third to the reader.

THE ASSEMBLY OF THE UNLIT LAMP

Founded 1954. **Members at time of visit** 23. **Meets** Thursdays.

The Assembly holds that a darkness is coming in which every artificial light will fail together. Electricity, gas and battery will give out in a single evening, and will not return. This is not presented as a punishment. It is presented as a correction. We have had, the members say, a good deal more light than was intended, and have stopped being able to see by any other means.

Each household keeps an oil lamp, filled, trimmed and never lit. It stands on a shelf by itself and is dusted on Thursdays. On the night, it is to be kindled, and those who have kept their lamps will find one another by them.

The founder was a woman who had worked in a lamp factory and is known as the Trimmer. I did not meet her; she died in 1963. Her successors are a committee of three, who are not permitted to receive revelations, a rule the Trimmer is said to have insisted upon with some force. The Trimmer left three dates for the darkness: 1958, 1961 and, as a last instruction, 1967. After the third had passed, the

committee announced that the darkness had come, but inwardly, and that the lamps should be kept all the same.

I asked a member, a retired bus conductor, whether he was not discouraged. He said that he had kept the lamp for nineteen years and had grown fond of it. "It is something," he said, "to have a thing in the house that you are saving."

The Assembly asks for nothing but the meeting and the lamp. I thought it the most restful religion I had encountered.

THE BRETHREN OF THE LAST FURNACE

Founded about 1931. **Members at time of visit** 9. **Meets** on the first Sunday, in a former pattern shop.

The Brethren are, or were, foundrymen, and their doctrine is a foundryman's. The world, they hold, is a casting. It was poured once, in a single heat, and it came out flawed, as first castings do. The flaws are what we call evil. No blame attaches to the founder, who knew the pour would be imperfect and intended a second.

The second pour is the end of the world. Everything will be broken up, returned to the furnace and run again, and this time it will come out true. The Brethren do not fear this. They speak of it as a tradesman speaks of a job that ought to have been done properly in the first place.

Their meeting consists of a reading, a silence, and the passing from hand to hand of a small iron casting, a bracket of no particular use, which has a blowhole in it the size of a pea. Each man looks at the flaw and passes it on. Nothing is said. I was allowed to hold it.

All nine members were over sixty. The works had closed, and no younger man had learned the trade. The secretary told me, without self-pity, that he supposed they would be the last, and that it did not matter, since the pour would come whether or not anyone was left to expect it.

THE QUIET MERIDIAN SOCIETY

Founded 1962. **Members at time of visit** about 40. **Meets** monthly, by rotation in members' homes.

The Society teaches that there is an hour missing from the day. It lies, they say, at the meridian, between the end of the morning and the beginning of the afternoon, and it has been overlooked for so long that clocks no longer show it. In this hour nothing is required of anyone. It is the rest that was meant to be built into time, and the general exhaustion of mankind is the result of our having lost it.

Members practise finding the hour. At noon, wherever they are, they stop. They do not pray or meditate, and the founder's pamphlet is firm that they must not try to feel anything. They simply decline to proceed for as long as they are able. A beginner manages a minute or two. I met a woman who claimed forty.

The Society expects no catastrophe. Its eschatology, if it can be called one, is that the missing hour will one day be generally noticed, and that this will be embarrassing for a number of people.

I record that at the meeting I attended, noon arrived, and forty people in a suburban sitting room stopped. Somebody's kettle was allowed to boil dry. I have attended cathedral services that had less effect on me.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	A Bestiary of Small Cults
AUTHOR	Alasdair Penhallow
DATE	1983
TYPE	Book
PUBLISHER	Mossgrove & Finch
EXTENT	214 pages in the original edition; preface and three of forty-one entries given here
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Set from the first edition. The book was not reprinted and the publisher ceased trading in 1986.

Alasdair Penhallow was not, by training, a student of religion. He was a surveyor who developed, in his thirties, what he called "a collector's interest in conviction," and spent his holidays for two decades attending the meetings of groups that had come to his notice through small advertisements, handbills and hearsay. He was scrupulous about telling them who he was and what he was doing. Most let him stay.

The book that resulted has forty-one entries, each describing a movement with fewer than two hundred members. It is arranged alphabetically, like a bestiary, and written without contempt. Penhallow thought the popular alarm over cults was aimed at the wrong target. The large and dangerous organizations would look after their own publicity. What interested him were the gentle, obstinate, unremarked little fellowships that asked nothing of their members but attendance, and in which he found "the religious impulse at its most naked, unassisted by architecture."

We give the preface and three entries. Penhallow's method is the model for our field guide, How to Read a Fringe Religious Movement.

COLOPHON

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